

Plain Language

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Presentation Outline

- Why use Plain Language?
- What is Plain Language?
- Where can I get help with Plain Language?

Why use Plain Language?

We're all busy people. We don't want to waste a lot of time trying to translate difficult, wordy documents. And when we go to the web, we want to scan, not read.

The CARES Decision resulted from a multi-stage, long-term effort and identified 18 sites for additional analysis and studies. These studies will include recommendations to VA regarding the optimal approach to provide current and projected veterans with equal or better healthcare than is currently provided, in terms of access, quality and cost effectiveness, while maximizing any potential reuse / redevelopment of all or portions of the current real property.

The Open Door Initiative is a program based on a simple and fresh attitude: that the CMS desires to better hear and interact with those beneficiaries, providers, and other stakeholders interested in the delivery of quality healthcare for our nation's seniors and beneficiaries with disabilities. This increased emphasis on responsiveness is captured through an ongoing series of 'Open Door Forums' that provide a dialogue about both the many individual service areas and beneficiary needs within CMS.

We want to hear from you!

Help us improve our service to you.

Attend an Open Door forum near you.

For information about upcoming forums, visit
[http://www.cms.hhs.gov/opendoor/schedule.a
sp](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/opendoor/schedule.asp)

Plain language means fewer calls from customers

	Old letter	New letter
Calls per month (per counsellor)	9.4	1.6
Calls per year (10 counsellors)	1128	192

Veterans Benefits form letter
Jackson, MS DVA office

Less time for users to solve a problem (in minutes)

Type of user	Old rule	New rule
Experienced	2.43	1.50
Inexperienced	3.51	1.73

FCC pleasure boat radio regulation

Fewer errors and better compliance

	Old form	New form
Error rate ¹	40%	20%
Compliance rate ²	40%	95%

¹ Form to request free trees

² Livestock registration certificate

What is Plain Language?

A document or site is in plain language if users can -

- Find what they need
- Understand what they find
- Use what they find to meet their needs

Plain Language and the Web

- Web users scan – they don't read. Many web pages are too dense.
- A key principle--write for the audience.
- Avoid bloat! Less is more! Plain language helps keep your writing concise.

The most important principle
of writing for the web:

Remember the
audience!

Write and organize for the audience

Know their level of expertise

Generally, do not write one page to more than one audience.

Tell them what they want and need to know—not what you want them to know.

Let's say you're interested in finding out about environmental issues.

You go to

epa.gov

Let's look at another one

You're interested in forests.

What would you like to know?

So you visit the Forest Service site.

<http://www.fs.fed.us/>

Look at all your pages

- What would the audience expect to find?
- Is it there?
- Is there lots of stuff the audience doesn't care about?

Some major plain language techniques

Use:

- Informative headings
- Pronouns
- Active voice
- Lists and tables
- Short, common words

Some major plain language techniques (cont'd)

Avoid:

- “Hidden verbs”
- Abbreviations
- Long sentences
- Unnecessary words
- Information the reader doesn't want

Informative headings help the
reader navigate

Questions are often the best
headings, because many people
come to your pages with
questions.

Agency Grant Program

What grants are available?

Am I eligible?

How should I apply?

Pronouns

- Pronouns such as I, you, and we pull visitors into your material and make it relevant to them
- Visitors need less “translation”
- Pronouns let you eliminate words

How do you use pronouns?

- Refer to your organization as “we”
- Refer to the reader as “you” in the text and as “I” in questions
- Make sure you define “we” and “you”

Without pronouns

To establish eligibility for a voucher,
an applicant must show that the
applicant has a low income and
that the present housing of the
applicant is substandard and
inadequate. *28 words*

With pronouns

To establish your eligibility for a voucher, you must show you have a low income and your present housing is substandard and inadequate. *22 words*

What is passive voice?

1. The person doing the action follows the verb.
2. A form of the verb “to be” is combined with the past participle of another verb.

***The frog was swallowed by
Fred.***

Passive voice

Can disguise who does what:

A frog was swallowed.

Active voice

Makes it clear who does what:

Fred swallowed a frog.

Passive voice

Can be awkward:

Consultation from respondents was obtained to determine the estimated burden.

Active voice

Is more direct:

We consulted with respondents to determine the estimated burden.

Passive voice

Is often longer:

The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the grants office by June 1st. 17 words

Active voice

Cuts the number of words:

We must receive your application by June 1st. 8 words

Let's do an exercise— pronouns and active voice

Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer. *52 words*

Once we establish your goals, we identify one or more potential employers. We prepare a preliminary proposal to present to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets both his and your employment needs. *37 words*

And another one

In an effort to help applicants prepare for their disability interviews and improve the initial disability claims taking process, a new adult and a revised child disability starter kit have been developed. The disability starter kits contain general information about the disability programs and decision-making process, and specific information about the documents and information we will request. The kits also provide links to online applications, including the i3368 and the i3820. Beginning April 5, 2004, a kit will be sent to an applicant when an appointment is made to file for disability benefits.

New disability starter kits for adults and children

Learn about:

- our disability programs
- how we decide on your benefits
- what information we'll need from you
- how to apply on-line

We will send you a kit when you make an appointment to file for disability benefits.

Use vertical lists

Vertical lists -

- Make it easy for the reader to identify all the items or steps in a process
- Add blank space for easy reading
- Help your reader see the structure of your document

Here's an example

EPA provides various paths for the public to access information about asbestos. On this website, you may access general information about [asbestos and its health effects](#). EPA has also developed a list of [commonly used Asbestos acronyms](#). You may also read about what to do if you suspect [asbestos in your home](#) or [your school](#) ([en Espanol - Asbestos en las Escuelas](#)). If you are in the automotive repair industry, you may want to read EPA's questions and answers about [asbestos in brakes](#).

If you wish to obtain more information on asbestos, EPA maintains a listing of [asbestos resources](#) available to the public. If you would like to locate an asbestos contact, EPA maintains a listing of federal asbestos [contacts](#). If you would like to learn more about the [laws and regulations](#) that govern asbestos, EPA maintains a listing of the laws and regulations applicable to asbestos.

You may read more about EPA's attempt to ban many asbestos-containing products on the [Asbestos Ban and Phase Out](#) page.

And in list form

Information about asbestos:

[asbestos and its health effects](#)

[commonly used asbestos abbreviations](#)

[asbestos in your home](#) or [your school](#) ([en Espanol - Asbestos en las Escuelas](#))

[asbestos in brakes](#) - especially for the auto repair industry

[other asbestos resources](#)

[asbestos contacts](#)

[laws and regulations](#) about asbestos

[asbestos ban and phase out](#) – EPA's program to get rid of asbestos

But don't make lists too long

Research suggests that seven items are the most that work well in a list. Longer lists are hard to navigate.

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/>

<http://www1.va.gov/womenvet/page.cfm?pg=18>

<http://www.faa.gov/pilots/safety/>

<http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/>

Tables

- Make it easy to take in complex material at a glance
- Make it easy to locate specific provisions
- Save words
- Make your logic and structure clear

But tables can be a problem on the web

Be careful—make sure

- Browsers preserve your formatting
- The table doesn't require horizontal scrolling

We must receive your completed application form on or before the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you do not submit your application electronically or the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting if you submit your application electronically.

We must receive your completed application form on or before the following dates:

If you submit your form...	We must receive it by...
electronically	the 25th day of the second month following the month you are reporting.
other than electronically	the 15th day of the second month following the month you are reporting.

Use common words

Use

Use

Help

Method

Needs

Limits

Issue

Not

Utilize

Facilitate

Methodology

Necessitates

Parameters

Promulgate

Avoid hidden verbs

Hidden verbs are verbs disguised as nouns. You should avoid them because they make your writing longer, and because real verbs make your writing stronger.

- Conduct an analysis

- Present a report

- Do an assessment

- Provide assistance

- Assist in the
characterization of

- Analyze

- Report

- Assess

- Help

- Help characterize

Avoid abbreviations

- Visitors complain more about abbreviations and acronyms than about any other feature of bureaucratic writing
- Using abbreviations turns your material into a research project for visitors.

Consider this example:

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) issued the document set forth below (the "Undertakings"). These Undertakings contain a set of representations regarding the manner in which CBP will handle certain Passenger Name Record (PNR) data relating to flights between the United States and EU member states, access to which is required under U.S. law (49 U.S.C. 44909).

These Undertakings provide the framework within which the European Union (EU) was able to approve several measures which the EU requires to permit the transfer of such PNR data to CBP, consistent with EU law. On May 17, 2004, the European Commission announced that it had issued an "adequacy finding" decision for the transfer of such PNR data to CBP, and a related international agreement was also approved by the European Council for execution.

Keep sentences short— especially on the web.

Through our Internet web site, we want to present information about the - employment and independent living services VR&E provides to service-connected disabled veterans - vocational counseling to service-members and veterans who have recently separated from active duty vocational-educational counseling, and vocational counseling or special rehabilitation services to dependents of veterans who meet certain program eligibility requirements. (57 words)

Let's do an exercise

Persons eligible for death benefits include:

Any citizen of the United States who, during any war in which the United States has or may be engaged, served in the Armed Forces of any Government allied with the United States during that war, whose last active service was terminated honorably by death or otherwise, and who was a citizen of the United States at the time of entry into such service and at the time of death. *(76 words)*

You may be eligible for death benefits if :

- you served in the US Armed Forces or of one of our allies in any war we fought;
- your last active service ended honorably, and
- you were a citizen of the US when you entered the service and will be when you die.

(55 words)

And another

If you have further questions about any of the substances listed, more detailed information can be accessed by way of the EPA's Homepage on the Internet at <http://www.epa.gov> or directly to the ATSDR Homepage on the Internet at <http://atsdr1.atsdr.cdc.gov:8080>.

For more information about these
substances, go to
<http://atsdr1.atsdr.cdc.gov:8080>

Challenge every word

- In order to
- We are currently planning
- The project is really critical
- In the case that
- To
- We are planning
- The project is critical
- If

See <http://www.plainlanguage.gov> for more word suggestions

Omit information the reader doesn't want

A major kind of unwanted information on federal sites is “advertising”—

How terrific your agency or office is at delivering wonderful services to the customer. Don't say it, just do it. Actions speak louder than words.

These sites have too much advertising. Your readers don't care!

<http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-m/nmc/web/index.htm>

http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/americannative/indian_cntryresource.htm

<http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/health-plans/complianceassist.htm>

<http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-o/g-opr/sar.htm>

Now let's talk about some webpages

<http://www.cms.hhs.gov/providers/hospiceps/>

<http://www.va.gov>

<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/pas/>

<http://www.mbda.gov/>

<https://insurance.va.gov/inForceGliSite/liability/ufsearch.htm>

<http://www.nrel.gov/>

<http://www.noaa.gov/>

<http://www4.army.mil/ocpa/soldierstories/>

More

<http://www.mms.gov/>

<http://www.usbr.gov/>

<http://www.fws.gov/fishing/>

<http://www.usgs.gov/>

<http://www.af.mil/>

Where to Get Help

For more information or to ask for free training, email me at:

Acheek@patriot.net

For lots of tips about plain language, visit our website:

www.plainlanguage.gov